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Short communication

The making of Tamil Shaiva Siddhānta

Ginette Ishimatsu

From the late 19th century, Tamil nationalists, as represented by the Self-Respect Movement, promoted Shaiva Siddhānta as the 'original' Tamil religion in an imagined ancient past, where social equality and harmony reigned before Brahmans forced the caste system and other social ills on the Tamils. Claims that Shaiva Siddhānta is specifically Tamil and non-Brahman in origin or essence continue to inform debates concerning Dravidian identity, the rights of Brahman temple priests, and the language of Hindu worship. These arguments have also prompted scholarly inquiry into the history of Tamil Shaivism. Research shows that Shaiva Siddhānta first developed in central India among male Brahman spiritual lineages; a distinct regional variation developed later in the south, with non-Brahman Vēḷāḷa leaders and authoritative writings in Tamil. However, traditional narratives of the lives of early non-Brahman gurus highlight the difficulty of transferring authority from Brahmans to Vēḷāḷas, who are classified as Shūdras. This inquiry into Shaiva Siddhānta's origins both emphasises a long history of ambivalence and accommodation between two powerful but ritually unequal groups and challenges continuing efforts to remake this tradition in the service of Tamil identity politics.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the question of the origin of Shaiva Siddhānta, the dominant school of Shaivism in Tamil Nadu, played an important part in the political debates about and the creation of a Tamil national identity. According to Eugene Irschick, the 19th-century interactions between the British and the Tamil society 'created an environment for the development of. . .anti-caste sentiments which found their expression in revivalist and nativist movements' exemplified by the Self-Respect Movement founded in the 1920s (Irschick 1986: 3). The high-caste, non-Brahman leaders of this movement had revivalist tendencies in that they

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sought to revive or restore Tamil society to what was imagined to be its original state, where equality among people reigned; in its so-called nativist aspects, the Movement also called for a removal from Tamil society of unwanted foreigners, namely Brahmans, who were said to have come in from the north only after the 5th century and who were blamed as the cause of caste discrimination and untouchability, the low status of women, the elevation of Sanskrit over Tamil, and the problems of organised religion, where Brahman priests were entrenched at the heart of the biggest and wealthiest temples, which are primarily Shaiva temples.

In this context, Brahmans could not be considered 'real' Tamilians, and only Shaivism could be identified as the original religion of the Tamil people, with Shaiva Siddhānta its highest expression, if 'purified' of its so-called Brahmanical elements. Given that this school of thought acknowledges the authority of the Sanskrit vedas and Āgamas, as well as the writings of Tamil saints and gurus, the Sanskritic elements, particularly the Shaiva Āgamas, came to be seen by some as mere translations, derivations or corruptions of original Tamil texts. Although 19th century and early 20th-century promoters of Shaivism like the reformer Ārumuka Nāvalār (Piḷḷai) and J.M. Nallaswami Piḷḷai, a government official and editor of a Shaiva Siddhāntin journal, did not question the importance of Sanskrit in their religious tradition, others certainly did. For example, the *siddha* poet Irāmaliṅkā Piḷḷai (1823–1874, now known as Ramalingaswami), explicitly rejected the authority of the Sanskrit Āgamas; his views later influenced the Self-Respect Movement (Irschick 1986: 85–86).

The impact of such ideas on 20th-century Shaivas has been mixed. On the one hand, the Tamil Nadu government has tried and sometimes succeeded in overturning long-standing religious customs like the employment of *devadāsīs* and the ban on untouchables in Āgamic temples. On the other hand, a Supreme Court decision in the 1970s blocked the state government's efforts to oust Brahman temple priests from their hereditary positions. During the same period, the government also tried unsuccessfully to force temple priests to use Tamil instead of Sanskrit in *archanā* rituals.

The debate on the origins of Shaiva Siddhānta has also had lasting impact on scholars, who have consistently refuted the notion that the tradition is inherently or originally Tamil. As I have already mentioned, as early as 1913, Nallaswami Piḷḷai stressed that there was nothing 'peculiarly Tamilian in Shaiva Religion and Philosophy'. On the contrary, he wrote, 'Almost all the terms and forms we use are derived from Sanskrit; and the bulk of the literature in Tamil dwindles to insignificance when compared with the vast Āgamānta literature in Sanskrit. And our Tamil Āchāryas were also great Sanskritists. . .' (Nallaswami Piḷḷai 1913: xi–xii). More recently, scholars of the early history of Shaiva Siddhānta have come to similar conclusions. On the basis of inscriptional and archaeological evidence, B.G.L. Swamy, Cynthia Talbot and others have traced the lineages of early Siddhāntin teachers back to spiritual lineages in central and western India. The school, first centred in what is now northern Madhya Pradesh, seems to appear in the 8th century or earlier; it based its teachings on the Shaiva Āgamas, a diverse group of texts that influenced Tamil Shaivism as well as the Shaivism in Kerala, Vīrashaivism, and the Kashmiri schools (Swamy 1975; Talbot 1987).

From the 10th to the 13th centuries, the school spread over large parts of northern India and came to have branches in the south as well. We begin to hear the names of Siddhāntin teachers in the Tamil country soon after the northern conquests of the Chōḻa kings Rājarāja I and his son Rājendra I; B.G.L. Swamy suggests that the Chōḻas may have been impressed with the Shaivism they encountered in their military expeditions and so facilitated the expansion of the school in the south (Swamy 1975: 197). Rājarāja I brought priests from all over India to perform the rituals at his new Bṛhadīshvara temple and had as his rājaguru the Siddhāntin preceptor Īshānashiva (Swamy 1975: 179). Similarly, Rājendra I supplied rich provisions for his chief priest and guru Sarvashivapaṇḍita, whose students came from northern India, Bengal, and the Deccan (Davis 1991: 6).[1] Inscriptional references to rājagurus as well as the names of other early preceptors all seem to point to the predominance of Brahman leaders in early Shaiva Siddhānta (Brunner 1977: 104–5, n. 249); in the Tamil region, certainly, Siddhāntin Brahman priests came to dominate the worship of Shiva in temples and uphold the use of Sanskrit in temple rituals. Siddhāntin preceptors also established *maṭhas* in the south.

From this sort of historical evidence, it seems clear that Shaiva Siddhānta originated in central India and spread to the south, its message propagated by a series of male, presumably Brahman, preceptors who were associated with *maṭhas* and temples and who claimed allegiance to the Sanskrit Āgamas. At first, it seems that the ritual and doctrine were transmitted in spiritual lineages from guru to disciple; however, in the modern period married Brahman *Shivāchāryas* pass down the ritual from father to son. It is still unclear how long this hereditary transmission has been taking place,

[1] B.G.L. Swamy (1975: 179, 192) confirms that Īśānaśiva was Rājarāja I's rājaguru, and that Sarvaśiva was Rājendra I's rājaguru.

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but Cynthia Talbot has found inscriptional evidence of it in 13th-century Andhra Pradesh (Talbot 1987).

I have pieced together a history of Shaiva Siddhānta in order to demonstrate why many scholars refute the notion that the school originated in Tamil Nadu and that it is 'essentially' Tamil in nature. However, it is true that from the 13th century we begin to see non-Brahman leaders, many of them fluent in both Tamil and Sanskrit, and the development of a distinct regional variation of Shaiva Siddhānta based on their writings, which are recognised as authoritative alongside the Āgamas, vedas, and the Tirumuṟai or devotional texts of the Tamil *Nāyaṉmār* saints. The core Siddhāntin works in Tamil begin with the *Vēḷāḷa* saint Meykaṇṭar's *Chivañānapōtam* (ca. 1223), the first text in Tamil to sum up the basic doctrines of the Sanskrit Āgamas. This is also the first of the fourteen canonical texts of Tamil Shaiva Siddhānta, called the Meykaṇṭa *Chāstirams* or *paṇṭāra Chāstirams*, where the term *paṇṭāra* means a non-Brahman priest or teacher. Some of the authors of the other texts are, like Meykaṇṭār, high-caste, non-Brahman *Vēḷāḷas*, while others, notably the 14th-century preceptor Umāpati Shivāchārya, are Brahmans. One distinct feature of these texts is that they de-emphasise the importance of *kriyā* (Tamil *kiriyai*) or ritual in favour of *jñāna* (Tamil *ñaṉam*) or knowledge (Brunner 1992). A further distinguishing characteristic of this school is that since the 16th century it has been transmitted in spiritual lineages of *Vēḷāḷa naiṣṭhika* ascetics, located in *maṭhas* in the Thanjavur region.

Why and how did *Vēḷāḷas*, who are classified as Shūdras according to the varṇa system, gain and keep such a position of prominence in what seems to have been a Brahman-dominated tradition? As Irschick has observed, anti-Brahman and egalitarian movements have a long history in south India. It may be that the Tamil branch of Shaiva Siddhānta developed separately from the Sanskritic tradition in reaction to the hegemony of Brahman priests and gurus (Irschick 1986: 82–83). However, according to the evidence of the Āgamic texts themselves, members of all four varṇas are eligible to become teachers; hence, the written rules do not prevent *Shūdras* from becoming leaders, though, of course, social reasons may. Alternately, since the Tamil texts downplay the liberating role of *kriyā* or ritual action, so important in the early Sanskrit texts, in favour of *jñāna* or knowledge, this move might be an indirect protest against Brahmanical monopoly of temple ritual, which becomes increasingly elaborate over time and apparently detached from its doctrinal moorings, as Richard Davis has suggested (Davis 1991: 18). But finally, it appears that the split in the lineage has more to do with caste linkages than with caste barriers, at

least in the early stages. Caste linkages are expressed in the transmission of the rights of preceptorship from Brahman to Shūdra, particularly in the Thanjavur region in the pre-colonial era. This is an area that from Chōḻa times has been characterised by competition among the two main land-owning groups, Brahmans and Vēḷāḷas (Stein 1982; Peterson 1989: 55). In Burton Stein's words, 'the question is whether a powerful and populous part of Hindu society was to enjoy a ritual rank commensurate with its ranking in other aspects of South Indian life' (Stein 1968: 81).

To judge from the evidence to the Āgamic texts, the answer to this question is both yes and no. Although the Āgamas present their teachings as applicable to members of all four varṇas and to both men and women, the texts do not agree as to who the best *āchārya* is. Many texts uphold the male *Shivabrāhmaṇa* or Ādishaiva Brahman as the model preceptor; this is apparently never contested in theory or practice. However, other works either ignore the existence of a special Brahman subcaste or insist that members of all four castes, men and (theoretically) women, can not only receive the highest, *nirvāṇa*, initiation, but beyond that can also undergo the rite that confers upon the initiate the rank of preceptorship, which brings with it the authority to initiate disciples and enjoy the full ritual privileges of the highest Siddhāntin members. However, these latter texts also add that (male) Brahman *āchāryas* are still the best, since only they can initiate members of all four varṇas; preceptors belonging to any of the other three can only initiate disciples of the same or lower varṇas (Brunner 1988: 151–52).

Thus it seems clear that the highest ranks in Shaiva Siddhānta are at least theoretically open to Shūdra men. And, in fact, the existence of Shūdra lineages seems to indicate that someone or some people belonging to a higher-ranking varṇa—and in Tamil Nadu that can only mean Brahmans—not only initiated Shūdras but also authorised some of them to become preceptors. But how and when did this happen?

The key seems to lie in the spiritual lineages of the Vēḷāḷa maṭhas. By tracing back the lineages of the gurus of Dharmapuram and Tiruvāvaṭuturai, two of the most important and powerful *maṭhas* in the Thanjavur region, what we find is a single lineage that begins with Shiva himself, descends through the four divine sages Nandi, Sanatkumāra, Satyajñānadarshini, and Parañjoti, then from Parañjoti to the first of the human lineage teachers, Meykaṇṭar, whose caste origins are mysterious. According to his story, he was found as a baby on the steps of a temple tank by a pious Shaiva Vēḷāḷa couple who had been praying for a child. At the age 3, the divine sage Parañjoti, who, according to one modern

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author, 'was travelling from Kailasha in the Akasha Marga [ethereal realm], saw the child, realised that it was eminently fit for *gnana upadesa* [spiritual instruction] and imparted the essential truths of Saivism to this child' (Kandaswami Mudaliar 1965: 33). The sage also gave the boy the *dikṣā* name of his own divine preceptor, the *muni* Satyajñānadarshini, but—significantly—gave the boy the Tamil equivalent of this name, or, Meykaṇṭār, 'he who saw the Truth'. Later, Meykaṇṭār went on to compose the *Chivañānapōtam* in Tamil. Thus, the story of the spiritual founder of Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta is surrounded by mystery and miracles: Meykaṇṭār is raised by *Shūdras*, but his true caste is unknown; the lineage is also first transmitted to a non-Brahman from a divine, rather than a human, Brahman source, which suggests that this first act of transmission requires legitimisation from a divine or superhuman source (Koppedrayer, forthcoming).

Meykaṇṭār lived in the early 13th century. Until the founding of the all-Vēḷāḷa *maṭhas* in the 16th century, we continue to see the lineage transmitted in extraordinary ways. The next lineage preceptor is Aruṇanti Chivāchariyar; as his title indicates, he was a Brahman temple priest. According to the stories about his life, he was actually the guru of Meykaṇṭār's foster parents and an accomplished Siddhāntin scholar known as *sakalāgamapaṇḍita*. In 1253, he composed the *Chivañānachittiyār*, a canonical work that refutes the doctrines of the other major schools and religions of the time and establishes the superiority of Shaiva Siddhānta. In his early days, though, Aruṇanti found his students leaving him for the young Meykaṇṭār. Angered, he located Meykaṇṭār in Tiruvennainallūr and found him giving a lesson on *ānavamalam*, the stain or evil of egoism. Aruṇanti arrogantly challenged him to explain the concept, whereupon Meykaṇṭār simply stared him in the face. The *Shivāchārya* understood and humbly accepted the younger, lower-caste man as his guru. Note that the problem of the Āgamic injunction against preceptors initiating anyone of a higher varṇa is conveniently avoided—Aruṇanti was already an initiated Siddhāntin preceptor when he recognised Meykaṇṭār as his true guru, the embodiment of Shiva.

The Siddhāntin torch next passed to Maṟai Ñāṉachampantar, who seems to have been a Brahman, given that *maṟai* means veda. His disciple was the famous Umāpati Shivāchārya (early 14th century), a Brahman priest who originally served Shiva Naṭarāja at the Chitamparam temple and the author of eight of the fourteen *Meykaṇṭa chāstirams*, as well as several other works in Tamil and Sanskrit. According to G.U. Pope,

Maṟai Ñāṉachampantar saw Umāpati pass by in a guru's palanquin and commented, 'There goes a man blind in the daylight!'[2] (Pope 1900: xciii). Like his predecessor, Aruṇanti, rather than take offence, Umāpati understood and became Maṟai Ñāṉachampantar's disciple. According to one account, during meal-time, Umāpati ate some rice that had fallen to the ground from his new guru's hand (ibid.: xciii). In another account, Umāpati ate *guru prasāda* in the form of *conjee* that was dripping directly from his preceptor's elbow (Arunachalam 1981: 20–22). In both versions of the tale, Umāpati's fellow priests at the Chitamparam temple were scandalised at his violation of caste propriety and his involvement in Āgamic practices. (The Chitamparam Dīkṣitar priests call their tradition 'Vedic' and do not intermarry or eat with Āgamic Brahmans.) According to Pope's version of the story, Umāpati was eventually expelled from his original community and spent the rest of his days in Koṟṟavaṅkuṭi (Pope 1900: xciii).

Umāpati initiated many students and, according to his own account, even guided a *chaṇḍāla* to liberation. One of his main students was Arul Namacchivāyar (ca. 1330), who was either a Brahman or a *cheṭṭiyār* (Zvelebil 1975: 207). His disciple, in turn, was one Siddhar Shivaprakāshar. From about this time, we see the regular transmission of the preceptorship from Shūdra master to Shūdra disciple. The Tiruvāvaṭuturai lineage, in fact, self-consciously groups its founding gurus in this way. They distinguish between the *upadesha paramparā*, or transmission of the teachings through the usual preceptors starting with Shiva and ending with Umāpati, Arul Namacchivāyar, and Siddhar Shivaprakāshar, and the *abhiṣeka paramparā*, transmission through the Shūdra masters whose authority comes from undergoing the special Āgamic ritual called the *āchāryābhiṣeka*. This latter part of the lineage starts with Namacchivāyar Mūrtti, who founded the Siddhāntin lineage at Tiruvāvaṭuturai in 1525, and continues unbroken down to this day.

In conclusion, going back to the 20th century debate over the origins of Shaiva Siddhānta, I have to disagree with the notion that there is nothing 'peculiarly Tamilian in Shaiva Religion and Philosophy.' Of course, I am not talking about a unique Tamil essence that either excludes or includes Brahmans. Rather, my own investigation into the origins of Shaiva Siddhānta suggests a long history of competition, ambivalence,

[2] A loose translation of the original (*paṭṭa kaṭṭaiyil ēkutu pārār*, 'see the man blind by day riding on dead wood!').

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and accommodation between two powerful but ritually unequal groups in Tamil Nadu. In particular, the narratives about the founding gurus, regardless of their historical accuracy, encode messages about the difficulties of establishing legitimate lines of transmission among Siddhāntin Shūdras. This struggle for power and legitimisation between Brahmans and high-caste non-Brahmans has continued in the 20th century, though the terms are no longer the same and are now much larger. Rather than jockeying for a share of power within Shaiva Siddhānta, high-caste non-Brahmans have sought to redefine and locate the religion according to the modern—and ultimately secular—ideas of egalitarianism and Tamil identity.

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